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Retelling the Past: Cinematic Narratives of Oppression and Resistance in Bolivia and Bengal

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Abstract

Politics forms the backbone of the cinematic visions of Jorge Sanjines and Mrinal Sen, filmmakers from twentieth-century Bolivia and Bengal respectively. This paper examines the potential of cinema as a weapon of resistance by focusing on Sanjines' *El Corajo del Pueblo* (1971) and Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* (1982). Sanjines reconstructs the events of the 1967 San Juan massacre, where Bolivian government forces violently attacked striking tin miners, while Sen's film depicts a film crew's journey to rural Bengal to make a film about the devastating 1943 famine—a man-made tragedy linked to colonial exploitation during World War II. Both films revisit political violence through experimental cinematic forms that blur the boundaries between fiction and documentary. This paper explores how the directors' direct engagement with oppressed communities becomes a tool for documenting collective memory and resistance. It also analyzes the use of aesthetics—non-linear narratives, montage, and self-reflexivity—as political strategies to foreground the realities of marginalized voices. In examining the coexistence of past and present within the structure of both films, the paper argues that the filmmaking process itself becomes an act of political intervention. Sanjines and Sen use cinema not just to represent, but to *participate* in resistance, offering a counter-narrative to dominant historical discourses. Their works demonstrate how film can function as a radical medium of protest, solidarity, and remembrance.

Keywords: Mrinal Sen, Jorge Sanjines, Politics, Resistance, Marginalized Voices.

In an interview, conducted by Dina Nascetti, originally published in the January 14, 1972 issue of the Uruguayan radical weekly, 'Marcha', and afterwards translated into English by Rafael Cook for the film magazine 'Cineaste', Jorge Sanjines had stated, "Film and politics are for us – and I am speaking in the name of the group that I work with – one and the same thing. Politics is inherent in fundamental human activity, and the commitment of the artist in confronting the social problems that surround him inevitably defines him, from the political point of view. The deeper his commitment, the greater political significance his work will acquire. The main thing is not to separate the concepts." In an interview, published in the same magazine 'Cineaste', Mrinal Sen had said, "I make films which have something to do with the political situation and involve political characters...I am a social animal, and, as such, I react to the things around me — I can't escape their social and political implications...the film has something to do with the social, political and moral constraints which determine our social behaviour and condition our daily living". As understood from the above-mentioned quotes, politics existed as an integral part of the films of Jorge Sanjines and Mrinal Sen, directors of twentieth century Bolivia and Bengal respectively. In light of Sanjines' 'El Corago Del Pueblo' (The Courage of The People) and Sen's 'Akaler Sandhane' (In Search of Famine), my paper will explore the ability of cinema to act as a weapon. Sanjines's film, directed in 1971, is a reconstruction of the historical events surrounding the massacre of the night of San Juan, dated June 24, 1967, when the government troops had attacked the striking Bolivian tin-makers. Sen's film, directed in 1982 is a film about a film-crew visiting a village to make a film about a man-made famine (a side- product of the second World War), that killed millions of people of Bengal in 1943. As both of these films are the retellings of political violence, my paper will try to compare the approaches of the directors, studying the aesthetics of the films. Analysing the two different forms, it will be studied how the direct contact

with the oppressed people has become the tool to document a history of repression in both the films. My paper will also try to observe the coexistence of the present and the past in the making of the films and try to understand how the entire process of filmmaking has worked as a weapon to express the resistance against the violence of political oppression, both in Bolivia and in Bengal.

First, I will try to observe the forms of the films. In an interview published in 'Cineaste', while talking about the making of 'El Corago Del Pueblo', Sanjines said, "In meeting with the protagonists of those events, we discovered that it was absurd to reconstruct their experiences by using professional actors. To make this film it was not enough simply to depend on technical resources, money, and personnel. It was necessary for people to provide a level of participation that quickly became the fundamental element of undertaking". Thus, the survivors themselves become the actors of the film. This endeavour marks Sanjines as one of the most important figures of the Third Cinema— a Latin American film movement, which started in the 1960s-70s as a protest against the Hollywood model of cinema, which, from a capitalist point of view, considered cinema as mere entertainment and as a medium to make money. Rejecting the view of cinema as a vehicle of personal expression, Third Cinema considered the director as a part of a collective. It presented the uncensored truth of political dominance in front of the audience and participated actively and directly in revolutionary activism. Sanjines, the writer of one of the four manifestos of this movement, named 'Problems of Form and Content in Revolutionary Cinema', practises the form of explicit teaching through this film. Explicit teaching is a term coined by Siegfried Engelmann and Wesley Becker, which, in the case of films, means there exists a narrator or character in the film, who directly states the social criticism. Sanjines's film vividly does this with the statements of the survivors and through the voice of an invisible narrator and often through the usage of captions. The film begins with a written statement, which, if translated into English, can

be quoted as — “This film is based on historical facts...as reconstructed from testimonies and documents”. As the film proceeds, some fragments of several military attacks are shown; and after the portrayal of each attack, the real names and the photographs of the oppressors are depicted, under the title of “Responsible persons”. These “Responsible persons” are the owners of the mines, the prime ministers, the presidents, the commanders and the generals of the military troops. Thus, the film directly points out at the economically privileged class of the society who exploit the underprivileged and at the carriers of the ‘Repressive State Apparatus’, a term coined by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, in order to analyse the power structure according to which a nation state functions. Other than the explicit teaching, there exists another form of teaching in which the revolutionary films function. This form is known as implicit teaching, in which the plot, visuals and general context of the film are permitted to express the message or critique. Mrinal Sen, one of the pioneers of the New Cinema movement in Bengal, explores this form in his film ‘Akaler Sandhane’, through a film-within-a-film structure. ‘Akaler Sandhane’ is not just a documentation of historical facts and events like ‘El Corago Del Pueblo’. Rather it follows a creative plot, based on a story written by Amalendu Chatterjee. In the film, a Kolkata-based film-director, played by Dhritiman Chattopadhyay, goes to a village named Hatui on September 7, 1980 to recreate the Great Famine of 1943. That means, what Sanjines, in ‘El Corago Del Pueblo’ does in reality, becomes the plot of Sen in ‘Akaler Sandhane’. But the approach of the character of the film director in Sen’s film differs severely from the approach of Sanjines. Unlike Sanjines and his team, the film-crew depicted in this film, can not reach or establish a true connection with the oppressed.

The film begins with a scene where the film crew proceeds towards the village by a car. This showcases them as the outsiders, whose true empathy for the oppressed is questioned

throughout the film. Just for the sake of acting, the actors look at the photographs of the famine. In a scene occurring in the middle of the film, it is shown that the crew members have been compelled to adjourn their shooting one day due to the rains. During this break, they are playing a game with some pictures of the famine. This cruel portrayal of detachment and an insurmountable distance between the actual survivors and the people willing to make a film on the suffering has been intentionally used by Sen, to depict the intensity of the distress and trauma experienced by the sufferers. When a distressed, poor village girl Durga, played by Srila Majumder relates her life with Savitri, a character of the film being made by the film crew, and keeps on thinking about her day and night, Smita, who is playing the role of Savitri, easily gets out of the character after her scene is over. Through this, and several other scenes of the film, Sen portrays the gap between the experienced and the inexperienced; or between the ones who look at the reality of suffering from top and the ones who are forced to look at it from below. How the traces and traumas of lived experience become an integral part of one's life can be understood through Federico Vallejo, a miner of the Siglo Veinte mine, who acted in 'El Corago Del Pueblo'. In the interview published in 'Cineaste', Sanjines recalls his experience of working with Vallejo, who "remained tied by his feet to a roof beam for more than twenty minutes and refused to let us take him down or break up the shooting into shorter takes, because he wanted to relive faithfully his state of mind during that ferocious experience suffered by him four years before, when he was tortured to the point of impotence from the blows". For Federico Vallejo, or Felicidad Coca, another survivor of the massacre of San Juan, and all the other protagonists of 'El Corago Del Pueblo', memory and the act of reliving the memory have become the weapons of resistance. Just like them, the function of memory has been present as a core element in the aesthetics of both the films. In 'Philosophy of History', Hegel comments, "...without memory of the past there is no history, in the sense of the

events that are meaningful to the collective, events experienced by a collective that is aware of them. Collective consciousness presumes collective memory...”.

When Mrinal Sen foregrounds the famine of 1943 in 1980, this act of going back to the violence stands as a representation of the collective memory that can not or should not fade out from the collective consciousness of a society. Sen, in the film, has deliberately rejected the act of creating pretty, aesthetic pictures of poverty and of rural life through camera. Sen shows the bed-ridden villager, played by Monu Mukherjee and the family of Durga using such harshness and rough edges that a strong sense of uneasiness and discomfort is generated in the minds of the spectators. Through these portrayals, the memories of the cruelty of the famine never ceases to be present in the layers of the film, directly or indirectly. In the film by Sanjines, these portrayals are more vivid and naked. Recreating a genocide of December 1942, Sanjines shows the throwing away the dead bodies in a hole by the soldiers using a mid-close-up shot. In the scenes portraying the massacre of the night of San Juan, the blood stained bodies of the miners of Siglo XX mine are shown in close-up shots, evoking a feeling of tremendous horror. Memory has been an important element in constructing the dialogues of the films too. In ‘Akaler Sandhane’, there is a scene where the villagers have come to the retired headmaster to express their grievances about the film crew. Here, one of the villagers says, “সেই আকালের দিনগুলো মনে পড়ে...কলকাতা থেকে আকালের সুযোগ নিয়ে কনট্রাক্টররা এল...আকালের স্মৃতি ভুলিনি”. Dialogues like “মনে পড়ে” and “মনে আছে?” are repetitively used throughout the film. This act of remembrance can be traced in the long monologue or statement uttered by Eusebio Gironda Cabera, the president of the Law Students’ centre who participated in the striking miners’ meetings. His words, along with recalling the night of the San Juan massacre, portray the context of the miners’ strikes and meetings and the political scenario of Bolivia too. How the Bolivian economy was engineered by North American

imperialism, how this imperialism tried to destruct the Bolivian trade unions, how the miners, who, in the words of Eusebio “had in a way become the defenders of the country’s dignity and pride” called a meeting, how the meeting passed a threat to the military and Fascist government and North American imperialism and how the workers and the students supported the guerrillas led by Che Guevara, have been stated through this statement. The repetitive usage of slogans by the Bolivian people, like “We don’t want to starve”, “Away with soldiers who kill the miners”, etc is also an act of remembering the protests and sufferings of the masses.

The songs which had been composed in the times of the massacres are demonstrated in the retellings of the oppression in both the films. In Sanjines’s film, on the night of the grand feast of San Juan, a little girl, who is the daughter of a miner of the Siglo XX mine sings, “Siglo XX is worse than any other mine/ There a miner works like a trapped dove”. In ‘Akaler Sandhane’, the song “হেই সামালো ধান হে” is sung numerous times by the members of the film crew. This song was composed by Salil Chowdhury during the Tebhaga Movement — a peasant agitation, initiated in Bengal by the All India Kisan Sabha, the peasant front of the Communist Party of India. In these ways, through memory and remembrance, the past enters into the present in both the films. This can be studied as a conscious attempt of the directors, to make their films to be present as a revolt against the power of the nation state, which constantly tries to wipe out the bloodstains of their horrific deeds. In ‘The Book of Laughter and Forgetting’, Milen Kundera wrote, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”. These films, where the past and the present coexist, thus work as a tool to keep the memory of the trauma alive in the public memory. ‘El Corago Del Pueblo’ ends with the words of the narrator, who says, “...We’ll never forget the names of those who committed this crime”. In ‘Akaler Sandhane’, Mrinal Sen deals with the past and the present in a more crucial way and in multiple layers. Firstly, by referring to the

famine of 1943, he is letting the past enter the present of the 1980s. Secondly, the protagonists of his film, that is the film crew visiting the Hatui village have been put in a troublesome situation when the past becomes the present in the film depicted within the film too. Most of the villagers become agitated with these newly arrived urban film crew, as they can feel their resemblance with the contractors who had arrived from Kolkata during the famine. The life and fate of Durga are shown to have an uncanny similarity with Savitri, a character portrayed as a representative of numerous survivors of the famine. This intertwined presence of past and present enables time to exist as a thematic thrust in both the films. This can be understood more intensely by observing some scenes in both the films. In the starting scenes of 'El Corago Del Pueblo', where some fragments of several military attacks are shown consecutively, the dates of their execution are highlighted. The scenes, one after the other, depict different massacres chronologically; like — December 1942, January 1947, May 1949, May 1950, May 1965, September 1965 and finally, June 24, 1967. This chronological depiction of political violence can also be observed in a scene of 'Akaler Sandhane' (1982), where the members of the film crew are playing a game with some pictures of the famine. The intended cruelty of this scene has been talked about in this paper previously. At this moment, the dates of the pictures and the politics of their depiction are trying to be observed. The heroine, played by Smita Patil, takes out three pictures one by one; The first photo is of the year 1959 Bengal. The second is of 1943 and the third is of 1971 Bangladesh.

Although the films are centred around two particular incidents, these chronologies and dates in both the films have been used to portray the timelessness and eternity of violence and oppression, which has been captured in the next shot of 'Akaler Sandhane', where Smita Patil takes out a picture, coloured entirely black, and says, "picture of darkness — Past, Present and Future". To conclude, it can be said that through the films like 'El Corago Del Pueblo' and 'Akaler

'Sandhane', the directors have exercised the notions of "conscientizacao" and "praxis", two terms coined by the Brazilian educator Paulo Friere in his book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. The first part "conscientizacao" involves the understanding of the oppressed group about the material conditions of the world in which they live and their identification of its dichotomies, hidden injustices and inequalities. The second part of the concept indicates the oppressed to come together and create a just and equal society by eliminating the injustices and changing the system. This leads to the concept named "praxis", which is a combination of reflection and action. Through the aesthetics of the films, the directors have made an attempt to embed these notions in the minds of their spectators also, which is one of the most important motives of both the Third Cinema and New Cinema. Jorge Sanjines, like the activists of Third Cinema movement used his films like 'El Corago Del Pueblo' to "inspire viewers to action, and to present strategies for obtaining the desired revolutionary results" (Leon G. Campbell and Carlos E. Cortes, *Film as a Revolutionary Weapon: A Jorge Sanjines Retrospective*). Similarly, while talking about 'Akaler Sandhane', Mrinal Sen stated, "My intention is to communicate as effectively as I can, to provoke the audience. The filmmaker has to be an agent provocateur — one who disturbs the spectators and moves them to action" (Cineaste, 1982, Vol. 11, No. 4).

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